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ABSTRACT

Since their founding, public libraries have debated their role in providing access to popular culture. This paper describes the historical development of public libraries as popular materials centers, and traces the development of library standards, particularly the seminal publication, "Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Options and Procedures." The founding and evolution of the Boston Public Library (Massachusetts) is discussed. While a new category of library service dissenters calls for a return to traditional, scholarly book-oriented programs in libraries, book stores have emerged as competitors in popular book-centered programming. (Contains 27 references.) (SWC)

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THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AS A POPULAR MATERIALS CENTER

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The Public Library as a Popular Materials Center

Introduction

In 1987, the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association, issued a publication entitled, Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Options and Procedures.[1] This document was allied with a national effort to substitute the development of national standards for public libraries with a strategic planning process that allowed public librarians to evaluate their efforts against local needs. Planning & Role Setting advised librarians to focus on their missions and select one or more of eight stipulated roles or emphases in public services. One of these eight roles, that of "Popular Materials Center," called on the library to be responsive to popular reading tastes. This paper will first describe the historic development of public libraries as popular materials centers, then trace the development of the Planning and Role Setting publication. This is followed by a discussion of how public libraries have interpreted their role as Popular Materials Centers over the past ten years. Evidence is presented of a new category of library service dissenters who call for a return to book oriented programs in libraries and the book store resurfacing of a new competitor in book centered programming.

Historical Background: The Development of the American Public Library

There is general unanimity among historians of library and information science that the establishment of the Boston Public Library in 1852 marked a landmark occasion.[2] Certainly there were public libraries before this date; the Peterborough, New Hampshire public library has operated continuously since 1833 and served to define the public library as in institution available for anyone in the community and financed through public funds.[3] Other types of libraries were in existence that offered services similar to those that the Boston Public Library would provide. There existed numerous predecessors to the public library in the form of apprentice and mercantile libraries, subscription libraries, YMCA libraries, athenaea, and rental circulating or lending libraries.[4] Yet, while the Boston Public Library built on a mixed tradition of service, it became the model for subsequent public library development with its eloquent mission statement, its board of trustees that set policy and reported annually to the public, and continuing public financial support through taxes.[5]

The Boston Public Library defined the first role of the public library as education; the new public library would be the 'crowning glory' to the public school system and serve as an institution for continuing literacy.[6] From its inception, the public library has served to do much more than that. As social agencies, public libraries have responded to the changes and influences in society.[7]

One of the earliest disagreements among public library supporters was an argument over the nature of the Boston Public Library's collection. Edward Everett, influential citizen and intellectual, argued that this new institution should provide materials that would allow the reader to pursue serious study. George Ticknor, Boston Brahmin, agreed that this type of collection would have appeal but persuasively argued for the provision of general, more popular materials that would serve to not only entice the reader to this new institution but set him or her onto the path of reading where the reader would eventually tire of the popular fiction and crave more scholarly material to consume. This new service was adopted and the public was allowed free access to literature that was less scholarly. Ticknor encouraged the adoption of this collection policy by his threat to refuse to further support the Boston Public Library if his ideas were not followed and free circulation of the library materials be allowed. The Boston Public Library set the precedent for providing, four classes of books, including, "books that would be asked for often, ... provided in as many copies as necessary."[8]

Historians have supported one of two explanations for the founding of the Boston Public Library.[9] To some historians, the founders of the Boston Public Library sought to promote a mechanism for social control; to others, the founders responded to existing social conditions and founded the library to further

democratization. Did the founders see the public library as an instrument for controlling the masses, particularly the growing immigrant population, or did they truly have benevolent ideals and believed that this new institution would enable any individual (adults to begin with, as patrons had to be 16 years old or older) to further their education? Whatever the case, the Boston Public Library's collection development philosophy soon became replicated as the public library movement spread across the United States from the mid 18th century to the end of the Progressive era.

The Fiction Question

Provision of fiction by public libraries would remain a much discussed issue in the field.[10] Injurious books were often discussed in conjunction with great concern of what the impact of fiction might be on readers, particularly children and women. Certainly, many public librarians developing collections of popular fiction for their adult users did have an ulterior motive in mind. Their aim was to satisfy the public desire for popular fiction in so far this gluttony led to a state of dissatisfaction that could only be resolved when the reader turned to more uplifting reading.

Development of Standards

It took the American Library Association (ALA), which was founded in 1876, some fifty years to issue its first statements of what constituted a good or even adequate public library. ALA

spoke in the form of standards. The first standards for public library service, issued in 1933, consisted of a two page article in Bulletin of the American Library Association, the official publication of the Association.[11] Early measures included references to the number of volumes that should be contained within an adequate public library, number and qualifications of staff, and number of service hours. The collection was to meet the varied needs of the community through a wide range of formats and subjects with continual acquisition of new items and withdrawal of obsolete or worn items. The smallest communities, those serving populations under 10,000, were to house three books for capita with the largest cities holding collections of at least one and one-half books per capita. This document initiated a forty-year involvement in the development and revision of quantitative measures by which public libraries could assess their performance. By the mid 1970s, it became apparent that prescriptive, quantitative standards had set up a situation that Lowell Martin called the "leaders vs. the laggards."[12] Some libraries would never be able to attain the suggested quantitative figures dictated for good service while other libraries had always exceeded the standards.

In 1980, the Public Library Association of the American Library Association issued a publication called A Planning Process.[13] Designed as a do-it-yourself manual to help public libraries engage in strategic planning, it supplanted the earlier

approach of setting quantitative national standards. The planning process was a five-year renewable cycle consisting of seven steps. These steps began with addressing the needs of the library community, largely through survey analysis, and extended to setting goals, objectives, and priorities, implementing strategies, and finally monitoring and evaluating the progress toward achieving the goals and objectives. The cycle would then begin anew.

A Planning Process was followed in the spring of 1982 by a complementary publication, Output Measures for Public Libraries.[14] Output Measures defined twelve output measures or ratios to use in evaluating public library performance, and illustrated how to calculate, analyze, and use the output measures. This planning document made a great impact on the field, resulting in over 200 articles in the field and hundreds of librarians exerting a great deal of energy and thought into the process, particularly where the data collection was concerned. Indeed, A Planning Process, or the green monster as the manual came to be named, referring to the publication's green and white cover, devoted nearly three-fourths of its content to detailed instructions on data collection and analysis. Many public librarians, especially those serving smaller populations, found themselves striving to follow these instructions to the letter. In addition, critics of the planning process decried the document's shallow discussion of determining the library role.

A Planning Process was revised and published in 1987 as Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries.[15] Output Measures was also issued in a second edition.[16] Since there was concern that these measures were not appropriate for all audiences served by public libraries, separate output measures were developed for evaluating services to children and for services to young adults.[17] Planning and Role Setting advocated that public librarians select one or more of eight defined roles that their libraries could adopt for at least a five year cycle. Roles identified services and, in some cases, audiences. These eight roles were as Formal Education Support Center, Independent Learning Center, Reference Library, Research Center, Community Information Center, Community Activities Center, Popular Materials Center, or Preschoolers' Door to Learning. Accompanying each defined role was a list of the related output measures that could be used to assess achievement of this role.

The role of Popular Materials Center was defined as one where the library purchased high-demand materials in all formats, promoted use of these materials and provided services that would appeal to the reader of popular materials. Appropriate output measures suggested for measuring whether a public library might be achieving this role included: circulation per capita, turnover rate (annual circulation divided by the total number of items owned); browsers' fill rate, subject and author fill rate; title fill rate; and borrower's registered as a percentage of the

population.

Interpretations of the Role of the Public Library as a Popular Materials Center

Librarians rank highly their institution's role as centers of popular materials. Childers and Van House conducted a national study of public library effectiveness. Their librarian respondents favored their role of Popular Materials Center over all other roles with the exception of the role of Reference Library and a tied ranking with Preschoolers' Door to Learning.[18] The Public Library Data Service (PLDS) is an effort to provide national comparative statistics for public libraries; each year the Service surveys a sample of some 500 public libraries systems in the United States, asking them to respond to a standard set of questions as well as including, in any given year, special questions. On the PLDS survey, librarians are asked to designate up to two primary roles, up to two secondary roles, and, if necessary, any tertiary roles they have formally adopted for their libraries. In 1993, Shearer reported that three-fourths (77%) of public libraries reporting data on their roles to the PLDS selected "Popular Materials Library" as a primary role.[19] Clearly, those working in libraries highly value the public library as a disseminator of popular materials.

Public libraries define their role as Popular Materials Centers through collection development, interior design modification, in-house marketing, and book based services, such

as reading groups and readers' advisory.

Collection development efforts include selecting and acquiring popular or potentially popular items. Interior design modification and in-house marketing include incorporation of book store display techniques to exploit high traffic areas. These techniques include point of purchase items, zig-zag shelving, face-out displays, pyramid or step-up displays, slanted shelving, paperback islands, development of signage systems, and other graphics. Internal space can be modified to create up-front browsing areas or zones designated as popular materials centers or genre reading rooms. Popular materials can be labeled and shifted to separate shelf ranges or areas. Access to materials within the collection may be improved by incorporating natural language subject headings into the library's catalog.

Within the field there is a resurgence in attention to the book reader; readers' advisory services have entered into a revival. In the early 1920s, five public libraries in large urban settings initiated a new, experimental public service called readers' advisory.[20] For the first time, any individual in the community had both a listening ear and a professional guide with whom they worked to plan a program of reading for pleasure and personal development. Starting in the 1950s, as reference and other types of information provision gained importance in public services, the role of the reader's advisor diminished. Fewer than 20 percent of those responding to a

survey of public libraries in 1973 indicated that there was a staff member officially titled a reader's advisor.[21]

Readers' advisory service entered into a revival in the mid 1980s. Indicators of this renewed interest was the publication of research and practice based articles on readers's advisory, including a special issue of Collection Building[22] and a continuing column in Library Journal, "Word of Mouth"; a focus on in-house marketing techniques to aid the reader/browser; the publication or development of readers' guides; and the national rediscovery of the adult reading club, an example of which is Oprah [Winfrey's] "Oprah's Book Club" book talking program aired on national television. Public libraries organize events where genre readers can gather. Mystery nights cater to those interested in participating in a staged mystery event. Public libraries sponsor or co-sponsor one-time or serial programs devoted to genre writing and fiction, such as Tucson Public Library's program, "Writers of the Purple Sage."

Within the Reference and User Services Association of ALA there is a Readers' Advisory Committee whose Collection Development Section issued the first bibliography on "Readers' Advisory Reference Tools: A Suggested List of Fiction Sources for All Libraries" in the latest issue of RQ.[23] Several commercial systems for readers' advisory were developed. Systems such as NoveList and Good Reads require the user to specify particular topics that are used to index titles, or they provide links from

individual books to other similar titles.[24] In recent years, a number of Internet-based computing systems have been developed for making recommendations for music, films, and similar items and services; two examples of recommenders are www.bignote.com and www.filmfinder.com.[25] These systems all make recommendations using a form of computerized matchmaking. The system maintains a database of the preferences of individual users, finds other users whose known preferences overlap significantly with a given patron, and recommends to a user other items enjoyed by their matched patrons.

Public Opinion of the Public Library as a Popular Materials Center

There is some evidence that patrons and librarians differ in their opinions of what constitutes the most important roles of the public library. Shearer terms this discrepancy between public and professional opinion a "crisis in public library priorities," that the profession is "confusing what is most wanted with what is most used."[26]

D'Elia and Roger received funding in 1992 from the U.S. Department of Education to survey public opinion about the public library roles. The survey was conducted by the Gallup Organization and results were published in ERIC[27] in 1993 and in Public Libraries in 1994.[28] Among the questions the 1,001 adults surveyed were asked was a question that asked them to select the role that best described the purpose for which they used the

library. Respondents were provided with this definition for the role of popular materials center, this is a situation where:

> "the library provides people with a collection of current best-selling books and popular magazines, videos, and musical recordings for borrowing."[29]

Results indicated that patron use and opinion of the library was in variance. People used the public library to get access to popular materials while, among both library users and nonusers, patrons thought the most important roles of the public library were closely connected to education. Respondents ranked these three roles to be most important: (1) Formal Education Support Center (mean score of 88.1% or 88.1 percent of the public ranked this role as "very important"); (2) Independent Learning Center (84.6%); and (3) Preschoolers' Door to Learning (83.2%). The public ranked these roles lowest: Community Activities Center (41.3%) and Popular Materials Center (51.4%).

In addition to surveying adults in the general public, D'Elia and Roger's also reported on a survey of community opinion leaders. Opinion leaders also thought that public libraries should stress roles related to education rather than entertainment.

Durrance and Allen compared the eight roles with the three priorities chosen for the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services (WHCLIS): literacy, productivity, and democracy.[30] They compared PLDS statistics for the roles the

public libraries selected and the answers the librarians gave to special questions posed in 1990. They indicated that libraries that did not select the popular materials role demonstrated a higher commitment to literacy and indeed they considered this role to be "hostile" to literacy developments.[31]

In conjunction with some evidence that public librarians and the public are at odds in their views of the role of the public library, there has emerged a faction of individuals who are very supportive of the public library but not very supportive of the public librarian. Notable among these library saviors are Nicholson Baker and Sallie Tisdale. In his articles in The New Yorker, Baker pits himself against some members of the library staff whom he feels are mismanaging libraries with an "entrepreneurial spirit, ... turning [them] into showplaces of information technology at the expense of hard-to-find and priceless books."[32] In Tisdale's article, "Silence, Please: The Public Library as Entertainment Center," published in the March 1997 issue of Harper's, she recalls in nostalgic tones the extinct public library of her youth, a imposing sanctuary of absolute silence.[33] Both authors voice a calling for the public library to return to the library of their memories: a quiet place, canyoned by old tomes that await discovery, and inhabited only by the "guerrilla librarians" who will fight for the book, any book, to the death, saving the book from potential withdrawal or weeding and even from the artificial representation of the

book in electronic catalog format.[34] Tisdale's threat is that if the public library does not reclaim its position as a quiet refuge, the book store will replace it as the memorial to intellectual pursuit.

Summary

Public libraries have, since their founding, debated their role in providing access to popular culture. What initially might have been a subversive plot to instill a intellectual virtue upon unsuspecting readers, is defined in a myriad of activities--of signs, and pamphlets, new book racks, and stickered books announcing WESTERN, MYSTERY or ROMANCE. But trouble is afoot. Some scholar patrons are bemoaning the move to change; some patrons and non-users call for a return to pre-popular fiction service. Will the public library be able to parlay a mix of roles into the future? Or will it need to retreat to its primal role of literacy and let mega-chain bookstores become the recreational stations where people gather to read quietly in sunlit, comfortable reading zones, to welcome touring authors, reading clubs, and children's programs?

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